

Refuelling under scrutiny as S.Africa penguins hit by oil spill

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Rangers have been rescuing African penguins, like those seen here, in the shallow waters off the South African coast

Rangers in wet suits have been searching for oil-tarred penguins in shallow water around St Croix Island off the South African coast as a

refuelling spill highlights conservationists' fears over pollution.

Experts said an unknown number of [penguins](#) had been affected on the rocky, uninhabited island, which is home to the largest breeding colony of endangered African penguins in the world.

A Liberian-flagged ship spewed between 200 and 400 litres of oil into the sea off Port Elizabeth city during "bunkering" re-fuelling—the process of filling a ship with fuel from another vessel.

The small-scale leakage from the bulk carrier MV Chrysanthi vessel at dawn on Saturday was the second oil spill in the environmentally-sensitive area in three years.

"This is exactly the concern with offshore 'bunkering' that we have been voicing concerns about," Stacey Webb, of the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds (SANCCOB) charity, told AFP.

"The danger is not over yet. Penguins forage up to 100 kilometres (60 miles) away from the [islands](#) (St Croix Island and Bird Island) so they could run into the spill out at sea."

About 20 penguins covered in black sludge have been rescued by national parks rangers so far.



African penguins, which are only found in South Africa and Namibia, are also known as jackass penguins for their braying call

The weekend spill follows one in August 2016 when about 100 birds were affected by a smaller "bunkering" spill.

"Bunkering" only started in Ngqura port, part of Algoa Bay, in 2016, with the [shipping industry](#) promoting it as an economic boost for the area.

Plans to develop the bay into a major re-fuelling hub for international vessels have generated widespread controversy, with conservationists and the tourism sector saying the risk of pollution is too high.

Declining population

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They re-colonised a beach near Cape Town in the 1980s and have since become a major tourist attraction.



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But there are only 50,000 mature African penguins alive, according to

the UN conservation red list.

"Is the money generated out of 'bunkering' in Algoa Bay worth putting the survival of a species at risk?" asked Jack Peeton, manager of Raggy Charters, a tour operator which organises whale watching and deep-sea excursions.

He said he had taken tourists to St Croix Island on Monday, only to be "greeted by the grim sight of rangers loading penguins covered with thick oil into small boats."

Port Elizabeth tourism consultant Peter Myles said the area plays a unique role in the penguins' survival.

"'Bunkering' in Algoa Bay has been a point of discussion with concerns raised over regulation," he told AFP.

"There are significant environmental risk factors, and St Croix Island supports the largest breeding population of the African penguin on the planet."

African penguin

*Spheniscus
demersus*



Native of: Namibia, South Africa

Spotted in: Mozambique, Angola,
Congo, Gabon

Current population: 50,000

Status: Endangered

Major threats:

Global-warming-induced
changes, egg-collecting,
commercial fishing

Source: IUCN/
penguinfoundation.org.au/
biologicaldiversity.org

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Fact file on the African penguin

The government described the weekend spill as a "tier-one incident" that did not require national intervention, though it added strong winds were hampering operations.

The South African Marine Safety Authority (Samsa) has launched aerial surveillance to determine the extent of the oil [spill](#), which is drifting out to sea rather than onshore.

Neville Noble of Samsa told AFP that bunkering was in line with government policy to opening up the ocean economy under the so-called Operation Phakisa and that operators underwent "a strict auditing process".

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